

SHADOW THEATRE IN ANDHRA PRADESH

"Tolu Bommalu Kattu"

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Introduction

Shadow theatre may be conceived as a special form of drama requiring a semi-transparent screen, a light source, and cut-out figures placed between these. The spectators on the other side of the screen see shadows of the figures only, and neither the manipulator nor his shadow.¹ Shadow theatre is thus a two-dimensional art form—a precursor of both film and television. It also falls into the category of marionette theatre, where cut-out figures or dolls are manipulated with the aid of strings or rods or both.

The German scholars G. Jacob and R. Pischel believe that the shadow play in Asia is at least as old, if not older, than the earliest attempts at dramatic representation with the aid of actors and that, like drama, it has its origin in ritual.² The religious significance is manifest today in all the Indian forms and in the Indonesian form *Wayang Kulit*, where, for instance, a prologue can express veneration of the dead. In Asia, the original form of shadow play is found in China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and India, and there are vestiges in the Near East.

Jacob and Pischel have cast light on the history of the shadow play in India and believe that it originated there, whilst other scholars maintain that China was its home. The play has persisted, more or less intact, in the following Indian-states :—Orissa, Andhra Pradesh,

Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala—by and large all the South Indian states—whereas there are no traces in Northern India or Ceylon. There are no extant literary sources to date it but according to oral tradition it was found in Andhra Pradesh as early as 200 B. C., when it was patronized by the Satavahana dynasty. Shadow theatre was also under the patronage of the Pallava dynasty, and of the Chalukya dynasty, which established itself in the present-day state of Karnataka. It is held that the shadow play flourished for the last time in Andhra Pradesh under the princes who ruled Vijayanagar from the 14th century, and especially under King Kona Reddy (16th century), in whose reign the Telugu manuscript *Ramayana Rangana-thana* was composed specially for the shadow play.³ The art had by then become the province of a special class, in which musicians, dancers, painters and stagehands had organized themselves into troupes of shadow players.

According to tradition, the original Andhra Pradesh shadow dolls were simple, opaque figures, some of which had joints connected to strings. These were called *keelu bomme* in Telugu, 'dolls which can be moved'. At the next stage, figures of translucent hide, painted and decorated, began to be used. These figures are called *tolu bommalu kattu*, 'dolls made of leather', the term which is used today.

In Sanskrit, the term *chaya nataka* is found, meaning shadow drama, or shadow play, but it also refers to a collection of dramas, among which is the famous *Dutangada* written by Subhata in the 13th century A.D. It is not clear, however, whether the term can mean a shadow play as such, and since shadow theatre as a drama form was not discussed in the ancient Indian treatise on drama, music and dancing, *Natya Sastra*, it is not possible to ascertain when it was accorded the status of "classical" drama. It was late to achieve literary form in *Chaya Nataka*, and there is no account of the realization of these plays.

Puppet-making

The hide of deer, buffalo and goat is used for the puppets, goat-skin being the commonest material. There is said to be a relation between the kind of skin used and the person represented in the figure: deerskin, which is difficult to obtain, is used for gods and heroes, and goatskin for saints and ordinary people, whilst demons are made from buffalo skin. This allocation of leather is practised in the area around Circars.⁵

With respect to size, too, there are different traditions in the various districts. In the Nellore district, which I visited, the average

size of the dolls is about 1.5 m, and in the Telangana district 1.2 m, whereas around Circars it is not unusual to find dolls approaching 2 m.

One sometimes sees the same person represented by dolls of varying size. Thus in performances in the Nellore district four figures of the monkey god Hanuman are used : besides the ordinary 1.5 m tall figure, a giant Hanuman battles with the demon army, a miniature Hanuman conceals himself in Sita's garden in Lanka (Ceylon) and another smaller Hanuman figure makes the bold jump across the strait separating Ceylon and India. Naturally, the little figure dashing across the big, empty screen creates a special effect emphasizing not only the monkey god's bravery, but his isolation and perilous situation. In the same performance, the demon king Ravana is represented by several figures to fit the situation. For the large shadow play figures it is necessary to use more than one piece of leather.

The manufacture of leather puppets, from the tanning of the hides to the cutting and decoration of the figures, is a part of the puppeteer's trade. As the demand for shadow plays is in sharp decline, however, it is rarely necessary to cut new dolls. The troupe I visited in the Nellore district had only a few pieces of leather, from which a little Hanuman figure was made for me. If I would order larger dolls, it would take a month or so to obtain hide and pigment, whereas all the necessary tools were still kept.

The prepared hide ready to receive the outline of the puppet is parchment-like, almost transparent, of the colour of light amber and with a smooth surface.

Earlier too, it seems to have been difficult to obtain skin for leather dolls. A deerskin may have a value of 100 rupees or more, and this is a considerable amount for a puppeteer. It is related that earlier, when shadow play performances were deemed a necessity of life and had great religious and ritual significance, rich villagers presented hides to the puppeteer, the name of the donor being incised on the finished figure.

In Andhra Pradesh are found the world's largest—and most mobile—shadow marionettes. In order to achieve this characteristic mobility, the various parts of the body are cut out separately. The leather is spread out on a wooden board and with very simple metal points the outline of the figure marked. With a firm hand, the leader of the troupe, the *sutradhar*,⁶ draws in the contours of the doll without a template or pattern, as though his memory is peopled with shadow pictures merely waiting to be realized on the outstretched leather.

He and his helpers need only five or six different tools : markers, scissors, punch and knives. For most figures, the trunk and head are cut in one piece, and the hands, upper arms, lower arms, feet, upper legs and lower legs separately.

The head and neck of important persons are a separate unit, being connected in a simple but effective way to the body to give extra mobility. This neck articulation is peculiar to the Andhra Pradesh shadow puppets. It confers life and elegance on the play and is employed to great effect in battle scenes or dance, where the puppeteer can, instead of turning the whole figure, merely turn the head, a deception which is accepted, indeed hardly noticed. A skilful manipulator gives the impression of figures constantly twisting and turning, whereas in fact the only movement is at the neck. The same deception, which often causes the faces to be cut in profile, is practised in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. The middle one of Ravana's ten heads is seen frontally, while the other nine are designed as if seen more and more in profile until the profile effect is complete.

The contours, and especially physiognomy, are an expression of the character of the doll. Body build and attitude, details of costume, and headdress and other ornaments indicate who is being portrayed, and the ability to characterize with the aid of a scorer and knife is a measure of the skill of the village artists. Heroes are furnished with oblong almond-shaped eyes, noble brows, straight noses and thin lips, whilst demons have protruding eyes, thick noses and lips, mouths full of long sharp teeth, and massive, cumbersome and aggressive bodies. Spiritual and physical power, refinement and vulgarity are contrasted in a simple but sophisticated manner.

The ritual element, which underlies all Indian theatrical tradition, extends to the decoration and cutting of the puppets. The features around the eyes, nose and mouth used to be the last to be cut, and since this completion will call the puppet to life, it is not effected until the puppet is to be used for the first time in a performance, so that it can be animated in the right manner.

In Andhra Pradesh, a few leather puppets are used [where the body is in one piece, or where only a hand or arm can be moved. In these "stills" the artists give full rein to their imagination : composition and decoration are more important than mobility, and the character of the person portrayed is expressed not only in build, but in the pictorial elements cut into the surface such as branches, vines, birds and flowers. In the Nellore plays, a leather still of this kind was used for Sita in her imprisonment in Ceylon. She is sitting

as in an arbour, almost concealed in foliage; a bird has settled between the leaves and is her only companion. She stretches her hand out (her arm can be moved by means of a bamboo-stick) and gives Hanuman a piece of jewellery to take to her beloved Rama.

Stylization and characterization

As in related forms of original Indian theatre, the shadow puppets represent mythological figures—gods, demons and legendary heroes—who cannot be portrayed in naturalistic form. They must by means of a certain stylization be made super-human figures, portraying the noble, the loyal, the demoniacal, etc. These characteristics are manifested not only in the outline of the figures, but in the detail.

The puppet, which is a mobile, expressive, pictorial element, must by means of facial expression and especially the expression of the eyes, reveal the spiritual life and attitudes of the subject. The facial features are thus emphasized and enlarged without being distorted; the eyes are made particularly expressive, and characteristic features of body build are underlined. But facial expression is not the only means of characterization in shadow puppets. The surface of the entire figure is amenable not only to colour but to line and pattern, to suggest costume and jewelry. These various elements are almost as important to characterization as the facial features are. This peculiarity of the shadow puppet, the use of the whole figure as a means of expression, was earlier, in particular, studied and exploited with such consistency that old shadow puppets are also art objects in their own right.

The village artists have developed a tradition for cutting and decoration which varies from district to district, and which has in the course of time undergone various stylistic changes. From a study of style one would be able to determine the age and provenance of the ancient shadow play figures. This material has not been studied however, neither has it been investigated whether there is any connection between pictorial elements in the folk art which shadow play is considered to be, and the friezes, reliefs and classical temple sculpture which depict Indian dance.

More important than the drawn patterns and lines is the effect produced by perforation of the leather. The Andhra Pradesh puppets do not cast a massive shadow on the screen, but, when most artistically made, a delicate tracery formed by allowing the light to pass through thousands of openings. In this play on light and shade, carried into the detail, lies much of the supernatural and dream-like effect of the shadow play.

A comparison between old and new dolls unfortunately shows that decorative technique is degenerating. The artists still have a certain skill, but the figures often lack life. Painted decoration has deteriorated and perforation is clumsy.

Colour and light

The interplay of colour and light is a prerequisite for an important part of the shadow puppet's expression. The linear and punctuate perforation of the leather suggests the pattern and drape of the costume, jewelry, fruits, and flowers and dewdrop the idyllic, the poetic and the spiritual. Demons have little or no perforation, with the exception of Ravana, king of the demons, on whom more colour and ornament are lavished than on gods and heroes.

The light source was originally a row of oil lamps, giving a warm but flickering light. When the lamps are topped up or the wicks trimmed, the light flares up, an effect which is employed when important figures like Ravana make their entrance. The light has just the strength and quality necessary to transfer to the screen not only the outline of the puppet, but the colours with which it is painted.

The original colours were black, red and green and their intermixtures, made from the plant extracts, soot and various earths available to any troupe. In the earliest dolls one finds, besides red and black, shades of green, blue, yellow, brown and reddish blue, which harmonized with the reddish-yellow light of the oil lamp. The light amber of the unpainted leather was often used for female faces or for special costume effects.

In the choice of colour, definite traditions are followed. Female figures are often kept in shades of yellow, orange and brown. Rama's face is a dark indigo, as he is described in the Ramayana as a very dark-skinned person. Ravana is painted in showy red colours, whilst Rama's loyal follower and brother Lakshmana has a light, womanish facial taint, corresponding to his mild character.

Chapter 23 in the ancient Indian treatise *Natya Sastra* gives about two hundred rules for costume and make-up, including a detailed description of the choice of colour for various characters in a drama: "I shall speak in due order, O Brahmins, about the Costumes and Make-up, for the entire production (of a play) depends on these."

Natya Shastra deals with drama with actors and does not mention marionette and shadow theatre, but its inclusion in a comparative study of colour tradition in Indian folk drama, whether with live

actors or marionettes, could throw light on the colour tradition, colour psychology and decoration technique which is the basis for the design of the shadow puppets.⁸

The most important source for textual studies of the shadow play in Andhra Pradesh is Ramayana Ranganathana. As mentioned in the introduction, this Telugu version of the Ramayana was written explicitly for shadow theatre, when this drama form was court art in the 16th century under King Kona Reddy in Kondapalli. In 1973 Guru C. R. Acharya, Darpana Academy, Ahmedabad, finished his translation of the Ramayana Ranganathana from Telugu into English.

With respect both to the manufacture of shadow puppets and to the lighting, various modernizations have occurred in recent years. About 75 years ago artificial pigments, which are often discordant with the light source, began to be used. Garish blue and purple came into use, and experts are able to date recent shadow puppets by the colours used. The greatest harm occurred, however, when the oil lamps were replaced by the Petromax type of paraffin lamp which has to be pumped up at intervals, giving a sharp, cold, bluish-white light, which completely alters the aesthetic values. All forms of original Indian drama (live drama, marionette theatre and shadow theatre) have used oil lamps or, on the entrance of important persons, primarily of demons, torches dipped in oil, sometimes also fires. When these light sources are altered, much of the grandeur and mystery of a performance disappears. In newly made dolls, one finds an imtemperate use of strong colours, and the vulgarization of the art form seems to have reached its height, when leather dolls began to be replaced by figures cut out of thick plastic.⁹

Manipulation of the puppet

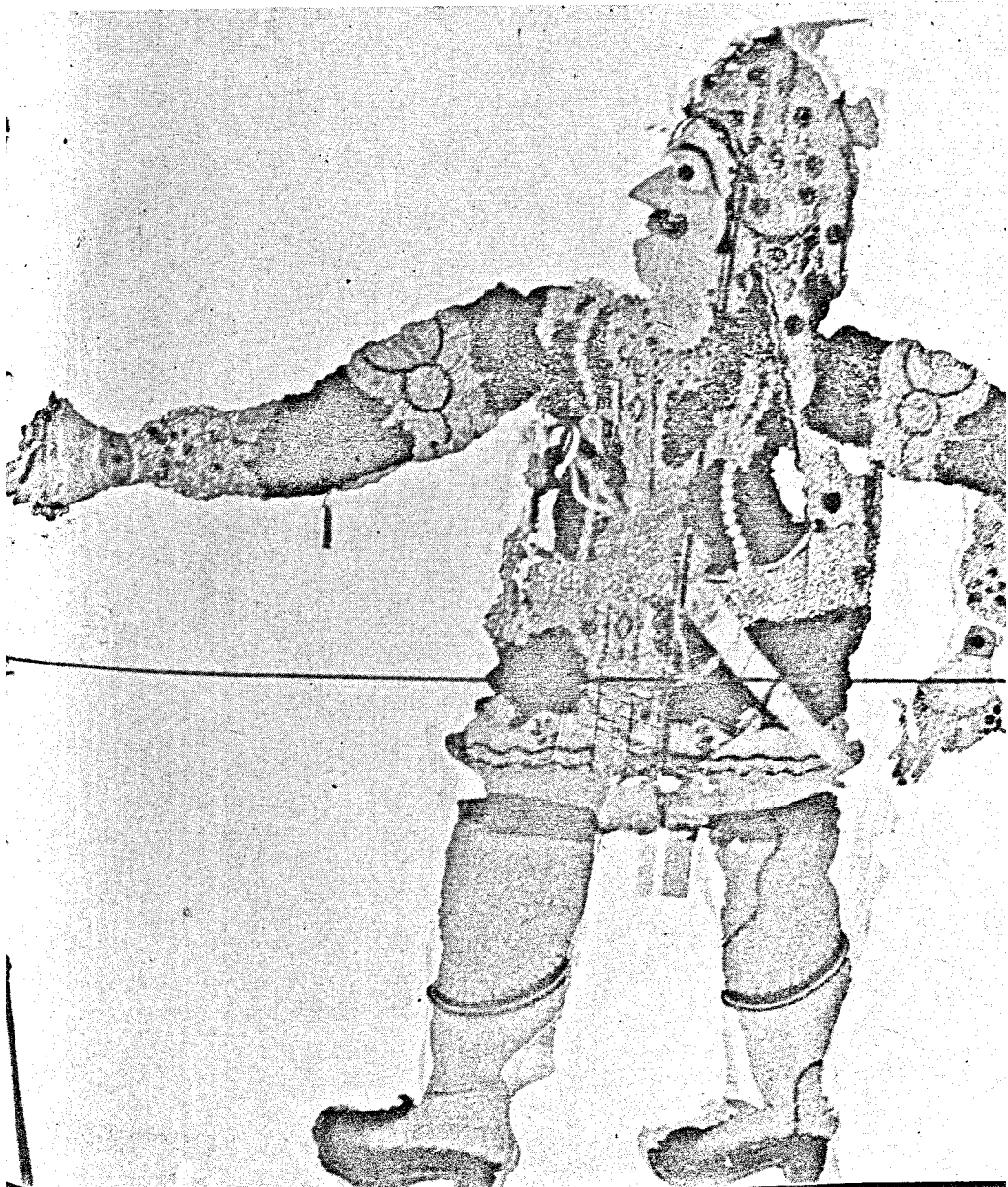
The theatre doll has qualities which have caused the drama theoritician E.G. Craig to consider letting the actor, if not replace, at least be influenced by the marionette :

"The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure-the Über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name."

"The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some beautiful and noble art of a past civilization."¹⁰

Dr. Marjorie H. Batchelder has in her 1947 treatise *Rod-Puppets*

Bhima in "Keecha-Vadha"

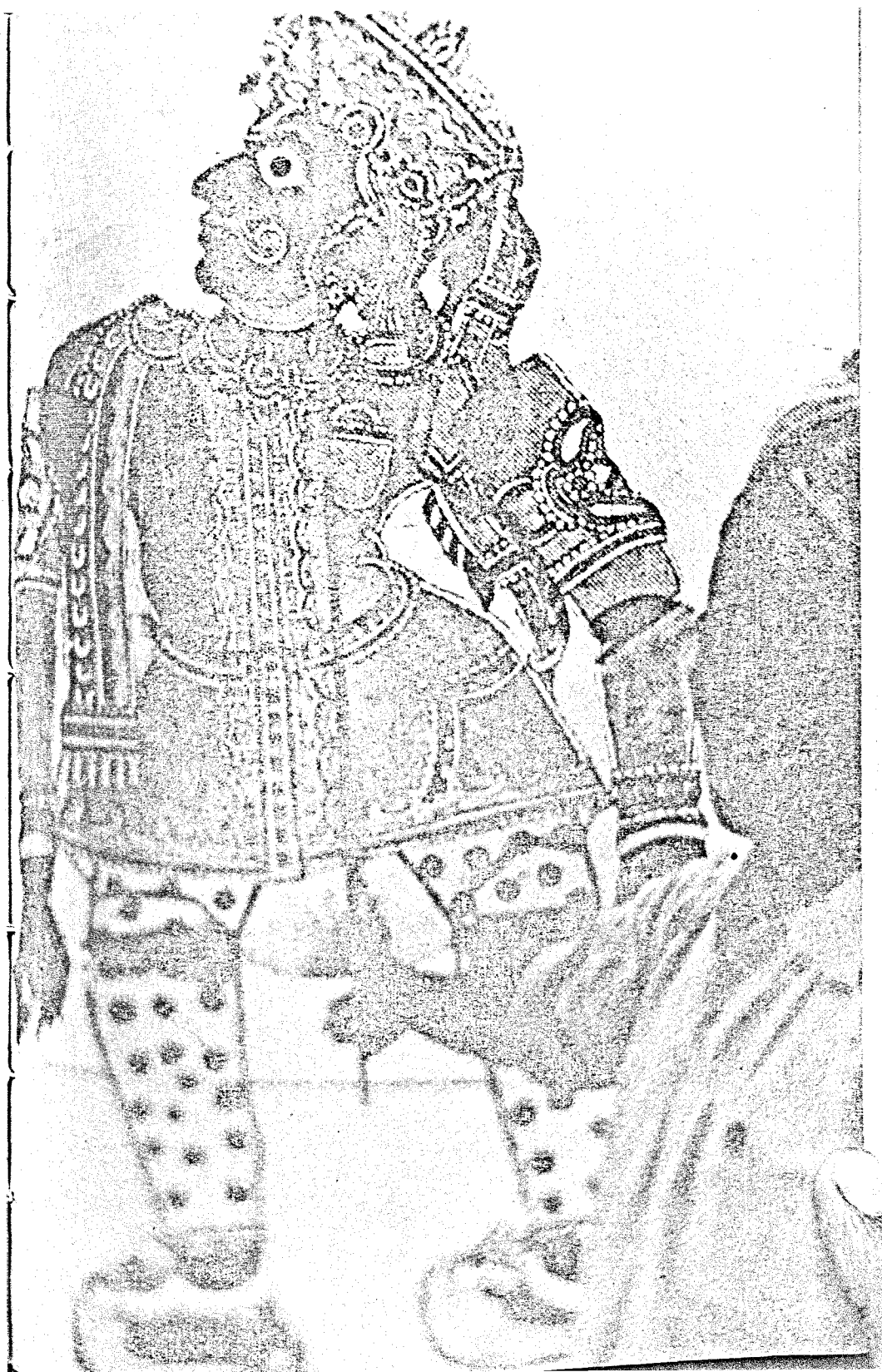


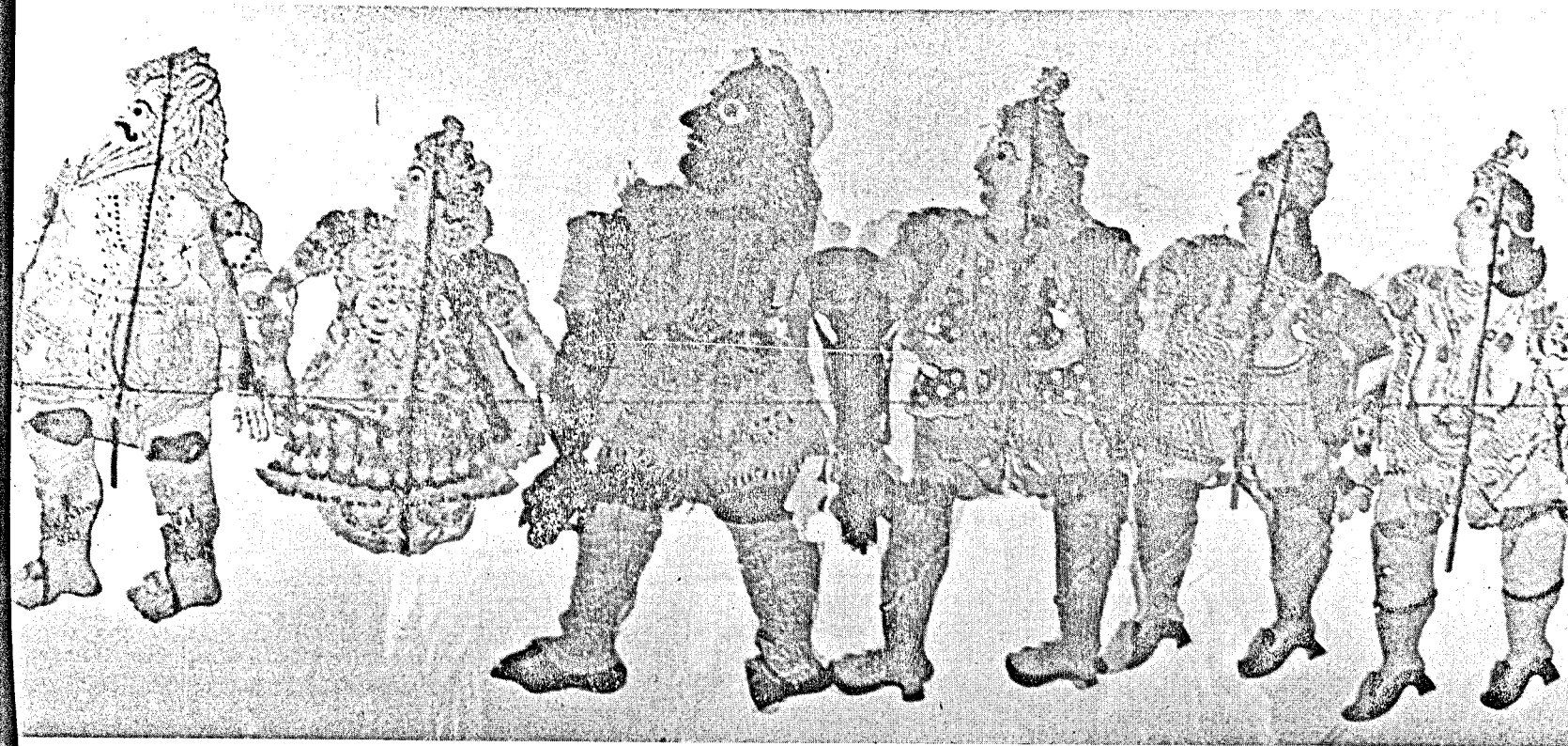


*Top : Bhima and
Keechaka fighting.*

*Bottom : Manipulating
puppets from behind
the screen.*

*Facing page : The
puppeteer manipulat-
ing the figure of
Rama.*





All the participating puppet figures brought on
to the screen after the play 'Keechaka-Vadha'

and the *Human Theatre* analysed the properties of the theatre doll, here briefly summarized :

1. The doll's strongest quality is its immediate ability to characterize. The doll is the person it represents.
2. The doll is devoid of egoism and nervousness ; it acts its part in complete sericousness, which gives it power and dignity.
3. The doll does not tire, it is always ready. It has a funny and at the same time a mystical life.
4. The doll has a mask-like face—it is itself a mask. If it is to communicate it must depend on a language of gesture.

Gesture language is the language of the shadow puppets. This applies particularly in Andhra Pradesh, where the various parts of the body are connected by strings with strong knots, sometimes further strengthened with transverse bamboo canes. Hands and arms have an enormous mobility and their possibilities for expression seem to be inexhaustible. By definition, the shadow puppet is a kind of rod-puppet held above the manipulator's head. The controlling rod is a cleft bamboo passing from the head to the crotch, so that the figure "rides" on the cleft stick as on a hobbyhorse. The bamboo cane continues in one piece below the crotch to serve as handle. Two thin bamboo canes are connected to the puppet's hands, allowing them to be moved in all planes and positions. The legs hang down loosely, but the puppeteer is able by rapid jerks to move them as required in battle scenes or dancing. In the most advanced Andhra puppets, arms, hands, head and trunk—and to some extent legs—are under the manipulator's control.

The female dancer occupies a central position in the shadow play. These dancing figures are often furnished with an extra articulation at the hips and shoulders. The head and neck has great mobility : the neck is connected to the trunk by means of a system of strings, and controlled by a handle of bamboo ; this permits the puppeteer to move the head from side to side independently of the trunk. Tremendous skill and a lifetime's training are necessary if the expressive possibilities of this brilliantly contrived doll are to be used to full effect and two puppeteers are often needed to release all the expressions. The two-dimensional leather puppet attains in the swirling movements a further dimension. Behind the screen, the puppeteers dance in the classical Kuchipudi style,¹¹ unseen by the spectators, transferring their movements to the very demanding doll.

When the figures dance, they are pressed close to the screen, to be seen as a clear silhouette. The movements of head and neck,

trunk, limbs and feet are shown with great accuracy. In a single jump, the figure turns and its shadow becomes nebulous. Even the colour effects are altered; the contours are only suggested as in a manifestation of a figure out of this world, but the rhythm and the steps are retained. At the next second the doll turns once more and is again presented up to the screen, continuing its unbroken rhythmic movement.

In order to synchronize the movements of the actors with the sound, the puppeteers must provide song accompaniment and the song and words of the figures, at the same time as they dance. The dance is a highly emotive dramatic element, which may provide the key approach to the understanding of Indian theatre. In *Natya Shastra* this experience is expressed in the *bhava-rasa* theory : "Bhava is the emotion that creates a sense of enjoyment or experience which in itself is an entity and that enjoyment or experience is *rasa*." Bhava and *rasa* are like Siamese twins, where bhava is the body and *rasa* the soul.¹² When the shadows break into dance, one is closest to this experience.¹³

With surprising speed and tremendous effect, all the puppets suddenly disappear from the screen, as if an unseen hand had rubbed out the shadows, before new scenes commence. Sometimes figures are fastened to the screen with acacia thorns, so that several localities can be suggested simultaneously.

The puppeteers can, by varying the distance between puppet and screen, make the shadow large and indistinct or small and distinct, a device which can be employed to great effect. In battle scenes it is used regularly when gods and demons make their entrance. When great armies move against each other, arrows fly, and demons are struck and fall, this play on the distinct and the indistinct is deliberately employed to make a strong impression on the spectators. When, as in a dream, they witness the battle between Good and Evil, they experience *rasa*.

The ancient technique of manipulation seems to be well-preserved at several places in Andhra Pradesh. Explanation of the fingering and arm movements would require a new system of description; detailed photographs of the technique or, better still, motion films would help to preserve shadow theatre for posterity. *Tolu bommalu kattu* are to the profane observer merely humble pieces of decorated leather, but the shadow they cast has a dramatic effect which cannot fail to impress. Dr. H. K. Ranganath's words on *Togalu Bombe*, the parallel form in Karnataka are even more appropriate to the Andhra Pradesh shadow puppets :

"Togalu Bombe is an inspiring art in the hands of an expert

who has achieved a mastery as to make his images live and perform miracles. A full-fledged performance, usually based on mythological theme, would show on the screen, human and animal figures in fantastic attire, moving, dancing and performing acrobatics, all in close synchrony with the background music by the chorus and the spoken words shouted by the manipulators. Battle scenes with moving armies are highly impressive. This art provides a great scope for the creation of fantastic pictures on the screen. The figures are specially made with meticulous care to give wild appearance and imposing movements. It can give a real experience, an experience that cannot be had from the modern stage even with all its amenities."

The Stage

Like nearly all traditional Indian folk drama, the play is performed in the open air on a temporary stage. The size of the stage depends on the materials at hand and on the size of the puppets. The screen must be almost transparent for the finest details of the shadow to be seen if the projected light is weak. Two or more snow-white pieces of cloth are used and cover the whole front of the stage. They are stretched out, pinned together with *tumma-mulla* (thorns from the acacia tree) and made fast to the corner posts. The screen has to be evenly stretched, without folds or hollows, to avoid distortion of the image. It may be 3-6 m in length and 2-3½ m. in height.

Since the puppeteers can only control the dolls from knee-height, the screen does not reach the floor of the stage; the space between the screen and the ground is covered by a dark piece of cloth through which light cannot pass. The stage will, with a view to the sound effects among other things, be raised 2 feet above the ground. The booth is constructed like a house, its depth depending on the size of the troupe, but usually 2-3 m. The roof and the rear and side walls in the box-like booth are made of tarpaulins and sacking. The entrance is at the back, but once the troupe is inside, nobody normally leaves the booth during the 6-8 hours of the performance.

Earlier, tradition dictated that the materials for the booth be provided by one of the prosperous peasants of the village, whose people also took care of the construction of the booth and the clearing up after the performance. The cloths were provided by the village dhobi, and the barber supplied the lamps.

To obtain the best result, the screen is made to slope slightly

towards the auditorium. This, in conjunction with a rope tied between the foremost corner posts, about 75 cm above the floor, prevents the puppets from slipping down during the play. The dolls can be stuck between this rope and the screen when they are not being manipulated.

Illumination

The traditional illumination employs oil lamps of metal or coconut shell, suspended in a row behind the puppeteers' heads. Great care is needed to place the lamps at exactly the right distance from the screen. If they are too far away, not only do the puppeteers become visible to the spectators, but their shadows fall on the screen and confuse the effect. If the lamps are too close, only those puppets directly in front of lamps will cast a satisfactory shadow, the others being either completely invisible or indistinct. To give the best result, the lamps must be placed at head-height and about 60 cm from the screen.

Oil lamps are today considered old-fashioned, and since they are an expensive source of illumination, with an attendant fire risk, they have, as mentioned above, been replaced by Petromax lamps, and much of the artistic effect and mystery has been lost. Oil lamps could, true enough, be glimpsed through the screen, but the puppeteers and their shadows, and to a great extent the shadows of the controlling rods, were invisible if the lamps were suspended correctly.

Sound and sound effects

It is a constant source of wonder that a troupe of six to ten persons can fulfil the multifarious roles of manipulators, singers, dancers and instrumentalists in the narrow booth. The troupe is so practised that every member seems able to take on any role, with two exceptions¹⁴: the women of the troupe always provide the voices of the female dolls; and the sutradhar always manipulates the dolls in the most difficult dance numbers. Songs in chorus alternate with dialogue and monologue, but only the songs have written texts, handed down from generation to generation. In general, the puppeteer himself lends voice to the doll he is manipulating, and as nearly fifty different dolls may take part in a single performance, the puppeteers have to be able to alter their voices to suit the role.

In battle scenes, which often occur in the heroic plays, expressive sounds like grunts and screams are used. Moreover, the floor is deliberately constructed to act as a giant xylophone. The puppeteers constantly play on the planks with their feet to supply rhythm and

sound effects for the dance and single combat which are essential ingredients of the Andhra Pradesh shadow play.

Music

All the dramatic effects are utilised in Indian folk drama. Music and dance are used in communication to the same extent as dialogue and the Andhra Pradesh shadow play conforms in this respect. It may be regarded as a medium whose most important dramatic element is the rhythmical expression of the shadows through dance. Song expresses ideas and thoughts, while dialogue serves the more concrete purpose of bringing the action forward. The dancing on the other hand, fulfils the spectators' need for aesthetic experience, besides serving to build up feeling and emotion.

No instrument is more characteristic of Indian folk music than the drum, the so-called *mridangam*, which is the basic instrument in shadow play music. Drumming provides the overture, accompanies singers and other musicians, fills up pauses and imitates speech in rhythmical patterns; it underlies the entire performance and practically directs it with starting signals. Moreover, drumming in the village just before darkness falls announces a night performance. Traditionally cymbals and ankle bells are also used and in recent years the orchestra has been supplemented by a small harmonium providing monotonous background music. Sometimes a *muchavina* is also used, a brilliant wind instrument which like the drum has narrative character and can imitate language.

One can imagine that shadow theatre in Andhra Pradesh fifty years or so ago was still an indispensable element of village society that the music was just as familiar to the villagers as the theatre. The impression one receives today is that the songs and instrumental music are just those elements of the shadow play which have survived best on account of the fixed form and the written text.

In his book *Drama in Rural India*, J. C. Mathur gives a characterization of the narrative and lyrical music of a dance drama which also applies to the shadow play:

"The arrangement of songs in Indian folk and traditional play is not conceived as an architectural whole. There is a string of songs, and each song has its own mode or raga, and its own tala or rhythmic sequence. The narrative ragas, used mostly in linking commentary of the sutradhar as also in brief repartees between any two characters, are usually not more than three or four in number. The lyrical ragas on the other hand, are numerous and there may be sometimes in one play as many as 20-30 ragas. The number of

songs is, of course, more, there being several songs in one raga or mode. These songs seek to create the sentiment appropriate to the character or the situation. At the same time they constitute the bulk of the dialogue."

If the sutradhar is strong in vocal tradition, the troupe will use a variety of ragas.

Improvisation

Dialogue and monologue are improvised, and the reputation of a troupe depends on the sutradhar's technique of improvisation. The story is already known to the public, and thus it is the sutradhar's eloquence and ability to jest and give spontaneous and witty answers which are appreciated. The spectators value a performance for the skill of the puppeteers, in respect both of their technique and of their verbal performance.

Verbal improvisation comes into its own in some ribald scenes where the spectators can relax and enjoy themselves. In accordance with tradition, these scenes feature a grotesque married couple who sneak onto the screen after the most solemn passages to treat the audience to witty comments and refer to the latest events in the village. This couple and their hangers-on are the clowns of the shadow play. The husband, Juttu Polugadu, is a drunken lecher and inveterate womanizer, being suitably equipped with an enormous penis which can be erected by means of a string. In spite of his appearance he is cowardly, and trembles in fear of his fat, scandal-mongering wife, Bangaraka. Four or five of these comical interludes may be included in a performance, and they often occur just after a long section in heroic style, which has sent the audience to sleep. The funny intermezzos not only wake the spectators, but make them shake with laughter.

The Troupe

Puppetry is practised by families who have followed this occupation for several generations as their sole livelihood or to supplement their income from work on the land. Like Indian society in general, a troupe of shadow players is organized on patriarchal lines. From childhood, the prospective puppeteers are trained by the sutradhar in puppet-making and manipulation. They are also trained in recitation and singing, and as there are no printed texts, only handwritten ones, these exercises must build on verbal tradition. The training demands great perseverance and a fabulous memory, besides a knowledge of body movements and dexterity in manipulation. The troupe of six to ten members consists of members of the

same family or clan. It will contain at least two women to speak and sing the female roles.

The art of shadow playing seems to have "wandered" in the various regions of Southern India, and earlier it was popular first in one principality then in another. Under the dominion of the Nayaka kings, who established themselves around the middle of the 16th century in Tanjore, present-day Tamil Nad, the art migrated southwards, but also to regions west of Andhra Pradesh in the state of Maharashtra. In the first part of the 18th century it gradually disappeared from Andhra Pradesh. It returned again in full strength however, but now practised by artists from Maharashtra, who migrated to Andhra Pradesh from the regions around Belgaun and Mijapur in present-day Karnataka. Several of the existing families of shadow players can trace their lineage back to Maharashtra, but the origin of the art is hidden in the distant past.¹⁶ In Karnataka, shadow theatre is cultivated by nomadic troupes, the so-called *Kille Ketas*, who are also believed to derive from Maharashtra, whereas in Andhra Pradesh the troupes have a fixed abode.

The shadow puppets represent the troupe's capital, the only valuable possessions which have been handed down through the generations. Sometimes they can be used as a marriage dowry. Each doll represents a value of 50-100 rupees, and it has also been a tradition that well-to-do families presented dolls or leather to the troupe, who acknowledged the gift before or during the performance, drawing attention to the donor's generosity and excellence. To be involved in a performance as donor or patron is also considered, like mere attendance, to be an auspicious act.

Between the monsoons, the troupes tour the neighbouring villages giving open-air performances; in the rainy season they lay up. The sutradhar is the absolute leader of the troupe; he makes the arrangements, is the first singer and the first puppeteer.

As the performance is free to the spectators, the troupe depends for its income on the collection made during and after the performance, and on the generosity of the local landowners.

Theme

The theme of the traditional shadow play in Andhra Pradesh is taken from the great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, from the legends and mythology of the *Puranas*, and from similar sources. The *Ramayana* plays are the most popular, especially the account of Sita's release from imprisonment in Lanka (Ceylon). The songs have attained a fixed form. Those for the *Ramayana* plays usually derive from Sri Ranganath or Shri Bhaskar.

A troupe normally has a repertoire of six to ten different plays, varying in length between four and eight hours. No rehearsal is necessary, as the group has lifelong experience in song, instrumental music, dialogue and improvisation. A well-trained troupe is able to decide just before a performance what it will present. A performance may comprise one or two complete plays or excerpts from several different ones.

The most popular pieces are *Lanka Dahanam*, *Myravana Charitra*, *Indrajit Vadha*, *Kichaka Vadha*, *Dussasana Katha* and *Prahlada Charitra*¹⁷. They are performed in Telugu, but the sutradhar may show off his literary knowledge by including verses in Sanskrit.

Ritual

Siva worship and Tolu Bommalu Kattu belong together, Siva being the patron god of the shadow play ; but both the temple and theatre are cultural elements which are losing their importance. However, on the god's birthday, marked by the Mahasivratri festivities in May, plays are still performed outside the Siva temple at some places in Andhra Pradesh.¹⁸ Formerly, these plays could continue for nine consecutive nights from evening to first light. During Mahasivratri the troupe's prospects of earning are greatest, as devotees and worshippers of the god consider it a religious duty and an auspicious act to make a donation of money, however small.

Formerly too, a lamp would be lit in the Siva temple and borne in procession by the players through the village to the accompaniment of song and instrumental music. The procession passed three times round the booth and stage, and finally sang a hymn to the elephant god Ganesha, who is worshipped for his great knowledge and ability to carry a performance through to a successful conclusion. During this panegyric the oil lamps behind the screen were lit from a flame taken from the temple, and all the shadow puppets in their imaginative forms revealed.

The panegyric to Ganesha continued during the opening scene, where one saw the god sitting on his mount, the sacred rat, surrounded by trees and birds. After this the sutradhar announced the title of the play and introduced the characters.

Before the performance, the shadow dolls, wrapped in a piece of cloth, are brought into the booth. Even a hundred dolls packed together do not take up much room. The bundle is shown the greatest respect. The order is perfect ; the puppets can be quickly grouped and the puppeteers can with precision find those they are to use and have them ready. Sometimes a number of dolls are held by the outstretched rope, immovable, but waiting to take part in the play.

The Kumara Raja Rao troupe

During a festival of folk drama in Hyderabad in March, 1970, where shadow plays were performed for the first time in the capital of Andhra Pradesh, I had met sutradhar Kumara Raja Rao and commissioned a shadow play performance in his native village of Dharmarao Cheruvupalli. The story was to be from the Ramayana, and I had ensured that oil lamps would be the illumination.

The village of Dharmarao Cheruvupalli, officially abbreviated D.C. Palli is situated about 80 km west of Nellore, the main town in the district of that name. The members of Kumara Raja Rao's troupe are no different from the other villagers in their way of life and attitudes. The woman of whom I asked the way to "Kumara Raja Rao Tolu Bommalu Kattu" broke into a broad smile and accompanied me to Rao's house where I was received with great hospitality. The troupe has seven members: two women, three older men, sutradhar Kumara Raja Rao and his brother's 20-year-old son, due to be the next sutradhar.

The members of the troupe are almost landless, and now, when the demand for performances is dwindling rapidly, they face hard times. In recognition of this, the state of Andhra Pradesh has founded a centre in the village for the production of shadow puppets. Outside a mud-built house is a notice bearing the legend "Government of Andhra Pradesh, Department of Industries and Commerce, Pilot Centre for Leather Puppet cum Dolls Industry, D.C. Palli, Atmakur (Taluk)". This industry has not yet started, however; leather for the dolls is not available, only tools and a little pigment are at hand. Raja Rao told me of the long tradition of shadow theatre in the village, and of the great guru "dead many years ago". The guru had written down the songs for the plays, and these texts are used by the troupe today. With veneration Raja Rao showed me twelve worn leather-bound books containing them.

Construction of the stage

At 3 p.m. Raja Rao digs the holes for the four corner posts, which are the bearing posts for the construction, with a short-handed angle spade. He also digs a hole for a post to strengthen the rear wall of the booth. In the heat it is strenuous work to make the holes deep enough in the hard dry earth in the area in front of the temple. This is the natural meeting place for the villagers. He tells me that he performed at this site a month ago. After a couple of hours, the 7 m tall, somewhat inclined posts are erected and the earth around them tamped down.

At about 5 o'clock, the three older members of the troupe arrive. They tie the transverse beams in place between the posts and lay the floor of the stage, talking all the while. Two large stones which lie inside the rectangle of the booth serve to strengthen the floor. Only a few planks are to be found in the village and they are warped and bleached by sun and rain. The corner posts facing the auditorium indicate the inclination of the screen. No nails are used, the whole construction being tied together.

At 8 p.m. the two cloths forming the screen are placed in position. The back wall, roof and sides are hung with dark, blue material. Finally, a 1 m. broad opaque cloth closes the space between the lower edge of the screen and the ground. From 7 o'clock, it has been so dark that the work has been carried out by the light of two paraffin lamps. Two men sit on the ground and make eight oil lamps ready. These are iron containers with a handle. The men put cow dung in the bottom, over which they pour peanut oil. The lamps, which are furnished with four wicks, are placed in a row on the floor of the stage just in front of the screen.

Description of a shadow play performance in Dharmarao Cheruvupalli, 29th March, 1970.

8 p.m. Around a fire on the theatre site is a group of men playing the *dappulu*, an ancient percussion instrument. They announce in song that a performance will be held.

9.20 p.m. It is dark in the shadow theatre. The troupe has taken its place inside and is singing the introductory hymns to Siva and Sri Rama, the principal actor in the play. About three hundred spectators are assembled, about half of them children. They have brought woven bast mats which are spread out on the ground. They sit and talk quietly together while the children run around.

9.30 p.m. The oil lamps are lit on the floor of the stage, and nung in position. Ganesh is shown in tableau, with his mount, the giant rat, at his side. The praises of Ganesh are sung. The song also expresses confidence that the god will keep interfering spirits away, so that the performance will be successful. Ganesh rides out on the rat.

9.40 p.m. The goddess of wisdom, Saraswathi, makes her entrance. She is worshipped in song and entreated to let her wisdom—and that of the performance—be transferred to the spectators, so they may benefit from the performance. Saraswathi expresses her willingness in a fantastic dance, accompanied by song and instrumental music.

9.55 p.m. The first comical sequence. Juttu Polugadu and Bangaraka appear. The latter, with an exaggeratedly large ornament in her nose, comes on first with her naughty little boy, who gets up to all manner of tricks which his mother seems to delight in. Juttu Polugadu comes, on, a black figure with an enormous penis. He attempts to kiss Bangaraka, but gets his face slapped instead. Bangaraka reproaches her husband with not having been home for several nights. Juttu Polugadu's cousin, arrives. He proposes to Bangaraka, with the result that the jealous Juttu Polugadu challenges him. They wrestle and fight for a while but reach some kind of accommodation, to end the sequence as friends.

10.15 p.m. Bangaraka, Juttu Polugadu and the cousin address the audience. Each household is mentioned in turn. Jokes are made about the spectators. The guest, who has payed for the performance, is mentioned too.

10.30 p.m. The sutradhar introduces the play, "The Freeing of Sita". Sri Rama lives in the forest, exiled from his native Ayodhya with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. Rama is portrayed in song and dance as the symbol of love and chivalry. The idyll in the forest and the joy attained through a life of deprivation and asceticism is expressed. Lakshmana is portrayed as the loyal and devoted friend and borther.

10.50 p.m. Quick change to Lanka. Ravana's army of demons, *rakshasas*, which are wolf-like figures with long teeth, is shown. The powers of Evil have thus been introduced.

The hero in this Ramayana play is the monkey-god Hanuman, immortal son of the wind-god, Vayu. Hanuman's ability to change shape and swell up "like the sea at high tide" is illustrated by a set of dolls of increasing size. His strength is shown with jumps and somersaults.

Nearly two hours are devoted to introductory ceremonies, addresses to the spectators and presentations of the theme. After this the pace quickens. The troupe acts out the events from the last part of the Ramayana, which ends with Sita's release and the death of Ravana. The performance ends at 4.45 a.m. with the singing of hymns of thanks.

The spectators

The Indian film industry has caused a violent decline in the various forms of folk drama. In large villages there are open-air cinemas or cinemas accommodated in tent-like houses built of woven

bast mats. Only a few of the inhabitants of D.C. Palli will have attended a film show, however, and the nearest cinema is situated in Atmakur, a large village about 25 km distant.

I had expected more than the hundred and fifty of the adult villagers who attended the performance. Perhaps the limited attendance was due to the performance being detached from its original connection with the Siva festival or with other festivals traditionally associated with shadow play performances.

The spectators arrived at 9 o'clock, the women in small groups carrying the smallest children. Some had paraffin lamps with them, so one saw small flames coming out of the darkness. When they came nearer, the faces were illuminated in flashes, as if the shadow play had already begun. The women rolled their mats out on the ground and sat in groups in the temple areas. The paraffin lamps were allowed to burn all night, the groups forming small, faintly glowing islets in the large space. The men either stood or sat around the edge of the area. The spectators followed the play expectant and restrained. It was not long before the smallest children fell asleep and lay flat on the mats on the bare ground.

Except to the Bangaraka-Juttu Polugadu sequences and the direct address to the audience, one did not notice any violent reaction. There was, however, also a response after the entrance of Ravana, during the dances, and during Hanuman's jumping, dancing, acrobatics and transmutations. Hanuman was the children's favourite.

The spectators talked quietly during the performance, remarking on the play or on any other event. If they became tired, they lay down on the mats or on the ground and slept for a couple of hours. One can see this behaviour during village performances of other kinds of theatre. The spectators are interested in the preferred passages, and rest during the other scenes.

In one corner of the place was a tea stall with three men serving. Pots of boiling milk and water hung over a fire. The customers, all men, watched the performance squatting by the fire. At 2 a.m. the spectators started to go home; mothers had difficulty waking their children, who had fallen asleep all over the place. About half the spectators stayed on until the performance ended at 4.45.

NOTES

1. In the Javanese form of shadow play, *Wayang Kulit*, the spectators were formerly divided, the women seeing the play as dancing shadows on the screen, whilst the men were on the same side of the screen as the puppeteers and thus saw the actual, beautifully painted figures move against the screen as a background.
2. Pischel, 1900, p. 6: "Es ist nicht unwahrscheinlich, dass das Puppenspiel überhaupt die älteste Form dramatischer Darstellung ist. Sicher ist dies der Fall in Indien. Und dort haben wir auch seine Heimat zu suchen."
3. G. Ramakrishna Rao, "Leather Puppets in Andhra Pradesh," *Natya*, Vol. 9, no. 2, 1966; New Delhi; p. 15-16. "Historical records eloquently speak to the abundant royal patronage offered in the past to leather puppetry by the Satavahanas, Pallavas, Chalukyas, Kakatiyas and in the greater degree by the rulers of Vijayanagara."
- "Indian Puppets", *Marg*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, June 1968, p. 33: "Shri Acharya possesses a copy of the manuscript 'Ramayana Ranganathan', written specially for puppets in the time of King Kona Bhudha Reddy in the 16th century, under whose keen patronage the art had really flourished."
4. Tilakasiri 1970, p. 8: "The *chaya-nataka* (meaning literally *shadow-drama*, *shadow-play*)... is used to designate a collection of dramas, including the famous *Dutangada* of Subhata of the 13th century A.D. The term *chaya-nataka* has been interpreted in various ways and doubts were raised as to what it exactly meant."
5. K.V. Gopalaswamy, "Puppet Show and Shadow Play", article of 10 pages published by Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, Hyderabad.
6. The original meaning of the word *sutradhar* is believed to be 'string holder' (puppeteer?). Since this term is also used in classical Sanskrit theatre for the stage manager/producer role—the person who presents the play to the public—it is advanced by Pischel as one of the proofs of relationship between marionette theatre and drama employing live actors.
- Concerning the meaning of *sutradhar* and *chaya nataka* (cf. note 4) see Kindermann 1966, section: "Das Indische Theatre" pp. 21—120. Further, Ridgeway 1915, pp. 153-216.
7. K.V. Gopalaswamy, *Puppet Show and Shadow Play*.
8. One reason for the lack of written accounts of the history of shadow theatre may be that this medium was from early on considered to be a form of folk art. It is not unusual for folk art forms in India to lack historical background material.
9. Technical advances have during the past decade influenced both dance drama and marionette theatre in India. It has been found that certain drama forms are not only able to adjust to alterations in their external framework but also to profound changes affecting their content. This applies to Jatra; Nautanki and Tamasha, which have no ritual significance. But in the case of ritual drama like shadow theatre—changes can hardly occur without weakening the dramatic effect. See A.J. Gunawardana, "From Ritual to Rationality. Notes on the Changing Asian Theatre", *T.D.R. The Drama Review*, Vol. 15, no. 3, 1971.

10. In the second issue of *The Mask* (April 1908) Edward Gordon Craig published his sensational essay, "The Actor and the *Uber-marionette*". On the origin of the theatre doll he writes: "He is a descendant of the stone images of the old temple—he is to-day a rather degenerate form of a god."
11. Kuchipudi, a village in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, is believed to be the home of the dance tradition called *Kuchipudi Bharata Natya*. The region is also known for its dance drama.
12. Appa Rao 1967.
13. Natya Sastra, chapter VI, verse 31: "What is the meaning of the word *rasa*? It is said in reply (that *rasa* is so called) because it is capable of being tasted. How is *rasa* tasted? (In reply) it is said that just as well disposed persons while eating food with many kinds of spice, enjoy its tastes and pleasure and satisfaction, so cultured people taste the Durable Psychological States while they see them represented by an expression of the various Psychological States with Words, Gestures and the Sattva and derive pleasure and satisfaction."

Natya Sastra is believed to date from about 300 B.C.

14. In folk drama with live actors and most forms of marionette theatre, all the roles are played by men and boys. It is remarkable that women act both as puppeteers and singers in the Andhra Pradesh shadow plays.
15. J. Tilakesiri points out in *The Puppet Theatre of Asia*, that this comical married couple in reality represents an ancient fertility cult, Sanskrit literature mentioning special festivals, where ritual invective was used.
16. The theory that shadow theatre originated in Maharashtra, which is based on the fact that several of the troupes who cultivate the art today can trace their lineage back to this state, does not stand up to close scrutiny.
17. All traditional shadow plays have mythological content. *Lanka Dahanam*, 'Lanka's fire', from the Ramayana, is the favourite.
18. H.K. Ranganath writes on the ritual function of shadow theatre in Karnataka: "The art of Togalu Bombe seems to have enjoyed a great religious significance for centuries in the Kannada land, particularly in North Karnataka and in the Kolar and Chitaldurg districts of Karnataka. It was a time honoured tradition to put up a Togalu Bombe performance in the temple to invoke the village deity to shower timely rains."

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